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Little Red Herrings — Library Permanently Closed: See Google

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

Imagine if you will the near perfect state-funded program. Yes, I know, such words sound like an oxymoron, given the track record of both state and federally-funded programs, past, present and undoubtedly in the future. Indeed, such words sound almost mythological in light of recent attempts by the federal government to spend us out of the current recession with still doubtful results (so far, a record deficit). Yet, you're an imaginative individual and can put aside petty political persiflage and visualize such a program. Not only does this program do precisely what it said it would do, it does it so surprisingly well that, as a taxpayer, you're completely astonished and wholeheartedly impressed. Let's further suppose — so long as it's all supposition — that we witness daily the success of this program, not only to those for whom it was originally intended, but also to many others who, by virtue of their station or accident of location, also benefit massively from this program.

Now, it's morning in the Palmetto State and we wake from our dream: our state legislature cuts the funding to this program by more than 90%!

Let truth be told: this was no imaginary program, but **PASCAL, Partnerships Among South Carolina Academic Libraries**. And, sad to say, nothing about the story above has been fictionalized in any detail. **PASCAL** did prove to be hugely successful for every two-

year and four-year, public and private academic library in South Carolina. Yes, it did return more than six dollars for every one state dollar it received. Our governor called upon state programs to be collaborative, cooperative, and share resources as often as possible. The *raison d'être* of **PASCAL** did just these very things, every one of them, and in the most efficacious way imaginable. So what went wrong?

With **PASCAL**, nothing at all. Clearly the economy — our state's, our nation's, and the world's — took a nosedive, partly because of the global economic meltdown, but partly, too, at least in South Carolina, because of the ill-advised change from property taxes to a sales tax. When the economy tanked, so did tourism in the Palmetto State, and with it any tax revenues the state hoped to collect. Naturally, all state programs had to cut back, tighten their belts, and scale back as much as possible.

But **PASCAL** lost more than 90% of its budget, from \$2 million to \$170,000 today. **PASCAL's** total budget from the state totaled only two million dollars. That's two million out of a twenty *billion* dollar state budget. **PASCAL** occupied one ten-thousandth of the budget. Legislators chose to all but kill a program that occupied one ten-thousandth of the budget that served over 200,000 students, faculty and staff in the state of South Carolina.

Our state seal reads in part, "*Animis Opibusque Parati*, or ready in soul and resources. If you're trying to re-tool in this very bad Palmetto economy, however, only your soul is ready. The resources are not only drying up, they're being taken away. The real tragedy is this: state officials know that there are more open jobs in South Carolina than there are people looking for work. But

guess what: many of these unemployed simply aren't qualified for the work. Could education be the answer? Good thing the other part of our seal says something about hope!

Some legislators will ask you, "If **PASCAL** is such a great deal, why don't the institutions just fund it themselves?" Besides, they did it this year. That's politician logic that defies, well, comprehension by everyday taxpayers. Academic institutions forwent various important initiatives to keep the **PASCAL** patient alive for one more academic year. Lost initiatives like positions, books, and services that students, faculties, and staffs rely upon paid for the one-year life-extension. Academic institutions funded **PASCAL** this year because it is the right thing to do, because it is such an excellent program, and because, well, the mind is a terrible thing to waste. But consortia like **PASCAL** only work when the costs aren't prohibitive, and the state's largesse — remember, one ten-thousandth of the state budget — provides just that right amount of coverage to make it work perfectly. After this year, however, without that two million dollars in funding **PASCAL** will unravel.

State legislators once saw the wisdom of funding **PASCAL** and courageously did so. We need courageous legislators once again. Funding **PASCAL** is what the young call a "no-brainer." And yet here we are, waiting with baited breath to see what will happen. **PASCAL** does not help **Winthrop** alone, but every academic institution in the state. It provides the necessary intellectual tools for our young people to succeed in the 21st Century. **PASCAL** is cost-effective, collaborative, and cooperative. **PASCAL** is the poster-program of shared resources. It really is a no-brainer. But without **PASCAL**, we saddle our state with deadheads, with a brain drain, and the possibility of jeopardizing accreditations statewide.

We are fast approaching a time when the headline of this article is our fate: the library is closed, and for all your research needs, just use **Google**. Many of you reading this are laughing at me but think about it. Libraries are financial black holes. They cost a fortune to run while creating little revenue. **Google** is free. In one fell-swoop, tens of millions of dollars spent on databases could be saved with one decision. Of course it's the equivalent of your spouse serving you pictures from *Bon Appétit* than actual food he or she prepared, but think of the calories you'll save — at least until you fall into a literal dead faint. Bean-counters everywhere will see the **Google**-ersatz as a quick and easy solution, not unlike what fast food is to health. But remember, it's free. And after years of this, just think of the possibilities: our collective ignorance will be our shared intelligence!

Funding **PASCAL** really is a no-brainer. Now all we have to do is convince decision-makers that it really, *really* is the only wise choice. 🍷



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we cannot offhandedly label publishers the scheming bad guys here. For most academic publishers, print sales continue to represent the majority of production costs and revenue. Revenue and production cost savings for eBooks have not yet reached a level that would drive the displacement of print business models. Understanding and recognizing the different environments and expectations all stakeholders — libraries, vendors, and publishers — are operating from will inspire more satisfying and innovative eBook models. Conferences like the ones mentioned above offer an opportunity for this exchange.

Steve: At **ALA**, you facilitated a panel of vendor reps and librarians discussing eBooks, including the growing popularity of the patron-driven purchase models, which also was

a major topic at **Charleston**. How about we pick up with that topic next time?

Robin: See you then. 🍷

Endnotes

1. **The Collection Development/Resource Sharing Conference**, Tallahassee, FL, March 25-27. program and related information can be accessed at: <http://www.lib.fsu.edu/events/resourcesharing>; the **2nd Exploring Acquisitions Conference**, Oxford, England, from April 15-17, program and related information can be accessed at: <http://www.exacqoxford2009.com/>; the **2009 ALA Annual Conference**, Chicago, IL, July 9-15, program and related information can be accessed at: <http://www.ala.org/ala/conferencesevents/upcoming/annual/index.cfm>.
2. **ALCTS'** program: <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/alcts/confevents/upcoming/ala/index.cfm>.